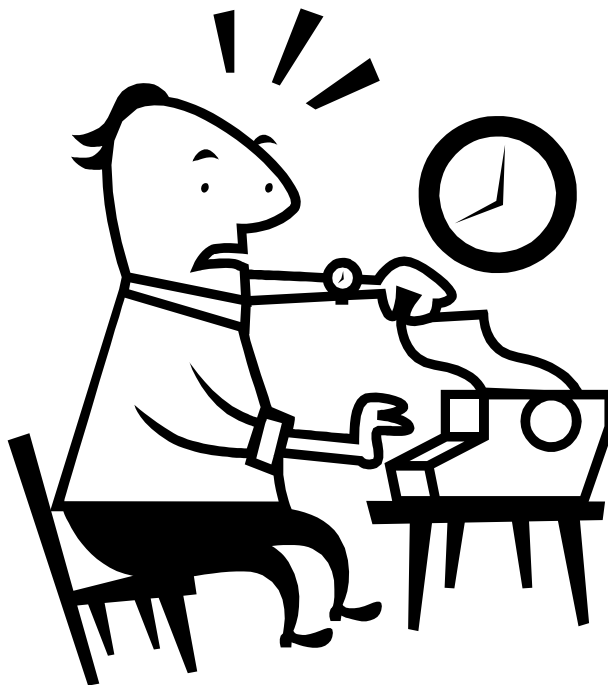


Anxiety Disorders



March 2006

KSC/CCAFS Health Education and Wellness Program

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Introduction

Anxiety is a normal reaction to stress. It helps one deal with a tense situation in the office, study harder for an exam, or keep focused on an important speech. In general, it helps one cope. But when anxiety becomes an excessive, irrational dread of everyday situations, it has become a disabling disorder.

Anxiety disorders are serious medical illnesses that affect approximately 19 million American adults. These disorders fill people's lives with overwhelming anxiety and fear. Unlike the relatively mild, brief anxiety caused by a stressful event such as a business presentation or a first date, anxiety disorders are chronic, relentless, and can grow progressively worse if not treated.

Five Major Types of Anxiety Disorders

1. Generalized Anxiety Disorder

Generalized Anxiety Disorder, GAD, is an anxiety disorder characterized by chronic anxiety, exaggerated worry and tension, even when there is little or nothing to provoke it.

People with generalized anxiety disorder can't seem to shake their concerns. Their worries are accompanied by physical symptoms, especially fatigue, headaches, muscle tension, muscle aches, difficulty swallowing, trembling, twitching, irritability, sweating, and hot flashes.

2. Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder (OCD)

Obsessive-Compulsive Disorder, OCD, is an anxiety disorder and is characterized by recurrent, unwanted thoughts (obsessions) and/or repetitive behaviors (compulsions). Repetitive behaviors such as hand washing, counting, checking, or cleaning are often performed with the hope of preventing obsessive thoughts or making them go away. Performing these so-called "rituals," however, provides only temporary relief, and not performing them markedly increases anxiety.

People with OCD may be plagued by persistent, unwelcome thoughts or images, or by the urgent need to engage in certain rituals. They may be obsessed with germs or dirt, and wash their hands over and over. They may be filled with doubt and feel the need to check things repeatedly.



3. Panic Disorder

Panic disorder is an anxiety disorder and is characterized by unexpected and repeated episodes of intense fear accompanied by physical symptoms that may include chest pain, heart palpitations, shortness of breath, dizziness, or abdominal distress.

People with panic disorder have feelings of terror that strike suddenly and repeatedly with no warning. During a panic attack, most likely your heart will pound and you may feel sweaty, weak, faint, or dizzy. Your hands may tingle or feel numb, and you might feel flushed or chilled. You may have nausea, chest pain or smothering sensations, a sense of unreality, or fear of impending doom or loss of control.

4. Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD)

Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, PTSD, is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to a terrifying event or ordeal in which grave physical harm occurred or was threatened. Traumatic events that may trigger PTSD include violent personal assaults, natural or human-caused disasters, accidents, or military combat.

People with PTSD have persistent frightening thoughts and memories of their ordeal and feel emotionally numb, especially with people to which they were once close. They may experience sleep problems, feel detached or numb, or be easily startled.

5. Social Phobia (Social Anxiety Disorder)

Social Phobia, or Social Anxiety Disorder, is an anxiety disorder characterized by overwhelming anxiety and excessive self-consciousness in everyday social situations. Social phobia can be limited to only one type of situation, such as a fear of speaking in formal or informal situations, or eating or drinking in front of others, or in its most severe form, may be so broad that a person experiences symptoms almost anytime they are around other people.



People with social phobia have a persistent, intense, and chronic fear of being watched and judged by others and being embarrassed or humiliated by their own actions. Their fear may be so severe that it interferes with work or school, and other ordinary activities. Physical symptoms often accompany the intense anxiety of social phobia and include blushing, profuse sweating, trembling, nausea, and difficulty talking.

Treatment

Two types of treatment are available for an anxiety disorder—medication and specific types of psychotherapy (sometimes called "talk therapy"). Both approaches can

be effective for most disorders. The choice of one or the other, or both, depends on the patient's and the doctor's preference, and also on the particular anxiety disorder. For example, psychotherapy has only been found to be effective for specific phobias. When choosing a therapist, you should find out whether medications will be available if needed.

Before treatment can begin, the doctor must conduct a careful diagnostic evaluation to determine whether your symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder, which anxiety disorder(s) you may have, and what coexisting conditions may be present. Anxiety disorders are not all treated the same, and it is important to determine the specific problem before embarking on a course of treatment. Sometimes alcoholism or some other coexisting condition will have such an impact that it is necessary to treat it at the same time or before treating the anxiety disorder.

If you have been treated previously for an anxiety disorder, be prepared to tell the doctor what treatment you tried. If it was a medication, what was the dosage, was it gradually increased, and how long did you take it? If you had psychotherapy, what kind was it, and how often did you attend sessions? It often happens that people believe they have "failed" at treatment, or that the treatment has failed them, when in fact it was never given an adequate trial.

When you undergo treatment for an anxiety disorder, you and your doctor or therapist will be working together as a team. Together, you will attempt to find the approach that is best for you. If one treatment doesn't work, the odds are good that another one will. And new treatments are continually being developed through research. So don't give up hope.

How to Get Help for Anxiety Disorders

If you, or someone you know, have symptoms of anxiety, a visit to the family physician is usually the best place to start. A physician can help determine whether the symptoms are due to an anxiety disorder, some other medical condition, or both. Frequently, the next step in getting treatment for an anxiety disorder is referral to a mental health professional.

Among the professionals who can help are psychiatrists, psychologists, social workers, and counselors. However, it's best to look for a professional who has *specialized training* in cognitive-behavioral therapy and/or behavioral therapy, as appropriate, and who is open to the use of medications, should they be needed.

As stated earlier, psychologists, social workers, and counselors sometimes work closely with a psychiatrist or other physician, who will prescribe medications when they are required. For some people, group therapy is a helpful part of treatment.

It's important that you feel comfortable with the therapy that the mental health professional suggests. If this is not the case, seek help elsewhere. However, if you've been taking medication, it's important not to discontinue it abruptly. Certain drugs have to be tapered off under the supervision of your physician.

Remember, though, that when you find a health care professional that you're satisfied with, the two of you are working together as a team. Together you will be able to develop a plan to treat your anxiety disorder that may involve medications, cognitive-behavioral or other talk therapy, or both, as appropriate.

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Treatment of Anxiety Disorders. National Institute of Mental Health. Retrieved on 14 Feb 2006 from <http://www.nimh.nih.gov/publicat/anxiety.cfm#anx9>

Resources and Where to Seek Help

National Institute of Mental Health
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

Wendyann R. Wyatt, Employee Assistance Program Administrator
Kennedy Space Center – Occupational Health Facility
321-867-7398

Community Psychological Services of Florida Tech
150 W. University Blvd., Melbourne
321-727-9956.

Serves Brevard and north Indian River counties, provides psychological help for children, adolescents, adults and the elderly in individual, couple and family therapy; Assessments available include learning disability, psychological and neuropsychological, as well as career counseling. The organization participates in National Depression and Anxiety and Eating Disorder screening days.

Family Counseling Centers of Brevard
220 Coral Sands Drive, Rockledge
321-632-5792
By appointment only (call Rockledge center)
725 DeLeon Ave., Titusville
507 N. Harbor City Blvd., Melbourne

Centers provide alcohol and drug services, mental-health counseling, case management and consumer credit counseling

Episcopal Counseling Centers
414 Pine St., Titusville
321-267-1019
50 W. Strawbridge Ave., Melbourne,
321-952-5482

Centers provide counseling, group therapy and testing

The Life Skills Support Center
1381 South Patrick Drive, Patrick Air Force Base
321-494-8171

Provides family treatment services for military families